

Immigration Official Hears Complaints About Red Tape

Ombudsman fails to give guarantees

By Oscar Avila
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After about 150 immigrants from all corners of the world vented their frustrations Saturday at the man recently appointed to help fix the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, activists asked him to guarantee improvement in his first year.

Prakash Khatri, named in July as the agency's first ombudsman, demurred on a commitment to reduce backlogs of case requests by a certain percentage. He agreed that delays in processing the paperwork that many immigrants need to become U.S. citizens, secure legal status or get federal benefits are not acceptable, but he said he has little authority to unilaterally revamp the agency.

"As an immigrant, I hear your pain," Khatri, a native of India, said in Erie Neighborhood House in Chicago. "If Congress would say, 'You are to become a dictator,' I could do it. But a guarantee from me now is impossible."

A Homewood man brought many to tears by telling how visa delays have kept his wife, a citizen of Kazakhstan, from bringing her young child into the country. Caseworkers told of how an immigrant lost a chance to apply for her dream job at a local police department because her green card was delayed.

Haonan Li, a native of China, said he has passed his U.S. citizenship test but has waited nearly four months to become naturalized. Frequent calls to the immigration agency's office have yielded little information.

"Why do we have to wait so long?" he asked Khatri. "I hope you can help us because we all want to become American citizens."

Though immigrants say customer service generally has improved, they complained about

problems with a new Web site and toll-free number intended to make it easier to get updates about their cases.

The meeting, part of Khatri's first official visit to Chicago, was intended to put a human face on the agency's bureaucracy.

"It's not about files. These are families, these are people," said Juan Salgado, executive director of the Instituto del Progreso Latino.

After years of pressure, mainly from Chicago advocates, Congress created the ombudsman's position as part of the restructuring of the former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. The agency was split into three new agencies under the Department of Homeland Security.

Khatri, an immigration lawyer from Florida, promised to return to Chicago to give an update within six months. Illinois contains the nation's fifth-largest population of foreign-born residents.

The meeting, also attended by U.S. Reps. Luis Gutierrez and Jan Schakowsky, was translated into Chinese, Hindi and Spanish. Representatives of Russian, Cambodian and other immigrant groups also participated.

Activists in the audience tried to cajole Khatri into a guarantee that he would reduce backlogs by 25 percent in his first year and 50 percent in his second year.

Immigration officials said they will take seriously any suggestions presented by Khatri's office.

"We have a new focus on the services side of the house," said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services.